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Chinese Narratives on “One Belt, One Road” (一带一路) in Geopolitical and Imperial Contexts

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This article reviews Chinese-language writings on the ideas of a Silk Road Economic Belt and Maritime Silk Road that have proliferated in the last few years, now under the aegis of and visualized as One Belt, One Road (一带一路). We examine how these narratives articulate with geopolitical and strategic ones in China before exploring the history of the idea of Silk Road(s). An excavation of their origins in nineteenth-century German imperial geography leads us to reflect on the past and present relations between states, empires, and geopolitics and to begin to chart the range of responses to One Belt, One Road. **Key Words:** China, geopolitics, imperialism, One Belt, One Road, Silk Road.

本文回顾近年来兴起的有关丝路经济带与海上丝路构想的中文书写，目前则由“一带一路”所涵括并体现。在探讨丝路概念的历史之前，我们检视这些叙事如何接合中国的地缘政治及策略。发掘其源自于十九世纪德国帝国主义的地理，让我们反思国家、帝国与地缘政治之间的过往与当下关系，并着手标示回应一带一路的范畴。 **关键词：**中国，地缘政治，帝国主义，一带一路，丝路。

Este artículo hace una revisión de los escritos en idioma chino sobre las ideas de un Cinturón Económico de la Ruta de la Seda y la Ruta Marítima de la Seda que han proliferado durante los últimos años, ahora visualizadas como Un Cinturón, Una Ruta (一带一路), y bajo su égida. Examinamos el modo como estas narrativas se articulan con las narrativas geopolíticas y estratégicas en China antes de explorar la historia de la idea de la(s) Rutas de la Seda. Una excavación de sus orígenes en la geografía imperial alemana del siglo XIX nos lleva a reflexionar sobre las relaciones pasadas y actuales entre estados, imperios y geopolíticas, y a empezar a trazar el rango de respuestas a Un Cinturón, Una Ruta. **Palabras clave:** China, geopolítica, imperialismo, Un Cinturón, Una Ruta, Ruta de la Seda.

On 7 September 2013, during a state visit to Kazakhstan, Chinese President Xi Jinping proposed the idea of the “Silk Road Economic Belt” (丝绸之路经济带) to enhance commercial engagements of China with Central Asia and beyond via land transportation networks (Xi 2013b). A month later, Xi’s trip to Indonesia concluded with his call for a “21st Century Maritime Silk Road” (二十一世纪海上丝绸之路) aimed at developing China’s economic ties along the sea route with multiple players in Southeast Asia, South Asia, and Africa (Xi 2013a). The translation of Xi’s Silk Road visions into strategic policy contemplations as encapsulated by the catchphrase “One Belt, One Road” (一带一路;¹ OBOR) soon garnered widespread international attention and debates, especially against the backdrop of the “China Dream” (中国梦) that defines China’s quest for “national rejuvenation” (复兴中华; Xi 2014a; see also Callahan 2013; Du and Ma 2015). The Chinese vision quickly displaced talk of a “New Silk Road Initiative” that had been announced just two years earlier by then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton as part of a U.S. exit strategy stressing Afghanistan’s integration into regional energy and trade markets, focused on links with South and Central Asia, but without mentioning China (U.S. Department of State 2011).

Few doubt that in OBOR, all Silk Roads lead to China. For instance, the London-based *Financial Times* evoked the geopolitically loaded phrase “The Great Game” to caution that China is on the “road to empire” through its new Silk Roads project, adding that OBOR is “set to become the largest programme of economic diplomacy since the US-led Marshall Plan for postwar reconstruction in Europe” (Clover and Hornby 2015). Similarly, an article in the *The Economist* (“Iran’s New Trains” 2016) argued that OBOR matters because of its scale (there are 900 deals under way, worth US\$890 billion, such as a gas pipeline from the Bay of Bengal through Myanmar to southwest China and a rail link between Beijing and Duisburg, a transport hub in Germany), the centrality of OBOR to President Xi’s conceptions of China (see also Brown 2016; Ferdinand 2016), and the way it treats Europe and Asia as a single space, contrasting with U.S.-centric views of a tripartite world (Europe–Americas–Asia) connected by trans-Pacific and trans-Atlantic networks and treaties. *The Economist’s* article appears with a map (see Figure 1) similar to dozens of others that can be readily found online in publications on OBOR produced by various Chinese ministries, some of which depict a range of offshoots, across Myanmar to India; for example, into



Figure 1 The geographical coverage of the One Belt, One Road Initiative. Source: © *The Economist Newspaper Limited, London* (2 July 2016). Reproduced with permission. (Color figure available online.)

Southeast Asia or across the Karakoram to the Arabian Sea via Pakistan. The depiction of the land belt, running near the Iraqi city of Mosul and then through those parts of northeastern Syria governed by Kurdish insurgents, seems fanciful. Parts of the “route,” however, are in place or under construction and the idea of OBOR seems to have already gained traction on the ground. Indeed, earlier in 2016, *The Economist* (“Foreign Policy” 2016) reported on the opening of a direct train service between the Iranian capital of Tehran and the transport and commercial hub of Yiwu City in eastern China:

When the first Chinese train pulled into Tehran station after a 14-day haul, Iranian officials hailed a great leap forward. “We’re becoming the global hub between east and west,” boasted one minister. By April, when the new trans-Kazakh railway opens fully, executives in Iran hope to have cut the journey time to China (see map) to just eight days—a month less than the sea route takes.

Alongside a map of the trans-Kazakh route (Figure 2), *The Economist* noted how Chinese loans to Iran had underwritten the modernization of Iran’s rail network. More widely, Sino-Iranian relations are seen to parallel notions of having emerged from great civilizations, bearing long histories of mutual exchange and a shared sense of victimhood at the hands of foreign powers. Garver’s (2006) account of these relations indicates the scope of writing in Chinese and Farsi. In Iran, the discourse predates the 1979 Islamic Revolution. But since then:

If the West served during the post-1979 period as “other” for both the PRC and IRI—that is what each *was not*, at least at the level of state-supported ideologies—China and Iran served for each other as part of the in-group of which one was a part, one that stood in contradistinction to the Western “other.” (Garver 2006, 15)

These accounts of the geopolitical implications and significance of OBOR are certainly not isolated examples and are part of burgeoning English-language writings on the topic (see, e.g., Fallon 2015; Clarke 2016; Ferdinand 2016). This article, however, adopts a different vantage point insofar as we focus first on academic and governmental discourses within China to develop understandings of their myriad representations of the OBOR initiative. In so doing, we echo Callahan’s (2010) contention that examining such Chinese texts enables insights into how the local elites interpret geopolitical issues. We share his aspiration to “see China for what it is, as opposed to what they [foreign powers and many commentators] want it to be” (Callahan 2010, 204). Moreover, as W. D. Liu (2014)² asserted, one of the key “misconceptions of OBOR” (一带一路的认识误区) pertains to the conceptualization of the project as comprising well-defined, fixed, and predetermined (maritime and land) routes and transects (as many of the cartographic depictions of OBOR connote). Instead, he drew attention to the ways in which the initiative should be seen as an “abstract and metaphorical concept” (抽象性和隐喻性的概念) that seeks to resurrect the cultural meaning of the ancient Silk Road (i.e., as a symbol of the cultural exchange and historical trading



Figure 2 The China–Iran railroad on which direct trains commenced running in April 2016. Source: © The Economist Newspaper Limited, London (2 April 2016). Reproduced with permission. (Color figure available online.)

relationships between China and the world beyond) to establish a platform for regional and global economic cooperation. In this sense, there is not always a singular belt or road that can be identified; rather, OBOR serves as a cultural metaphor to characterize two projects with expansive geographical possibilities—one over land and the other forging linkages in the maritime sphere—for the revitalization of global economic exchanges and interactions.³ Given such a formulation of OBOR as an open and extensive venture that simultaneously appears on maps as a set of lines, there is a need to attend to how this initiative is taken up through a range of Chinese narratives.

Hence, in what follows, we first examine the ways in which propositions for a rejuvenated Silk Road articulate with recent geopolitical writings in China. The subsequent section begins by noting that the prevalent themes embedded within Chinese writing on OBOR are relatively silent about the genealogy of the term Silk Road itself. In fact, calls for a revitalized Silk Road to enhance energy and security cooperation between northwestern China and Central Asian states have been around for at least a decade (Q. Li 2007), following the resumption of Sino-Central Asian trade as Cold War front lines faded in the late twentieth century (Karrar 2009, 2016). The story is much longer than that, however. References to a historic Silk Road (said to have been first established informally by the movements of traders during the Han Dynasty around 300 BCE; J. Ren, Yang, and Wang 2014) have late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century antecedents. We detail how the notion of the Silk Road originated in nineteenth-century German imperial geography. Returning to these and subsequent iterations of the Silk Road helps us to conceptualize the tension between representations of OBOR as fixed lines and the broader metaphorical notion invoked by key

proponents in China. We connect these dissonances with reflections on the past and present relations between states, empires, and geopolitics, closing the article with a reflection on the multiplicity of adaptations and responses to OBOR.

Geopolitical Contexts

Concerns about underlying geopolitical motives for establishing OBOR featured in a statement from China’s ambassador to Britain, who asserted that his country’s growing power and investments should not be seen as threatening (X. M. Liu 2015). Specifically Ambassador Liu noted how the OBOR initiative is being misinterpreted by some as confirming Mackinder’s (1904) heartland theory—that China is seeking to control the “pivot area” of Eurasia for geopolitical domination.⁴ Instead, he stressed the shared benefits of “development and prosperity” from China’s ongoing foreign policy engagements, arguing that “the Chinese mind is never programmed around geopolitical or geoeconomic theory” (X. M. Liu 2015, 9). Another study of Chinese commentary on and contextualization of OBOR notes that in a keynote speech in March 2015, “China’s Foreign Minister Wang Yi said that OBOR is not a tool of geopolitics (地缘政治的工具)” (Godement and Kratz 2015, 6). Close scrutiny of the wider scholarly and official discourses within China, however, suggests that OBOR has frequently been interpreted through a geostrategic lens, part of a wider embrace of geopolitical writing in contemporary China (see Hughes 2011).

Indeed, many Chinese writings reflect on the intimate associations between OBOR and China’s foreign policy (Yuan 2014; Su 2016). Some of these place OBOR as a geopolitical strategy, albeit

dependent and anchored on economic rationale. Shi (2015), a professor of International Relations at the Renmin University of China in Beijing, exemplified this line of argument most explicitly when he asserted that China is moving away from “hard power” and “strategic military” instruments to favor the use of “strategic economic tools.” According to Shi, the OBOR initiative and its auxiliary mechanisms such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Silk Road Fund are targeted at “building China’s strategic economy.” Such a viewpoint embodies a form of geoeconomics, recognizing that OBOR is competing to a certain degree with the twelve-nation Trans-Pacific Partnership that was sponsored by the Obama administration (and that excluded China), thereby demonstrating “China’s intention to increase its role at the US’s expense.” Ultimately, as Shi concluded, OBOR serves to materialize Xi’s (2014b) recent exhortation for “Asian affairs to be led by Asians” (亚洲的事情归根结底要靠亚洲人民来办).

Others have highlighted that OBOR should be seen in the context of evolving geopolitical circumstances. For instance, Xue and Xu (2015), the director and a researcher, respectively, at the Department of International Strategy, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, contended that OBOR is motivated by China’s wish to address “the US rebalance to Asia (亚太再平衡), Japan’s accelerated steps towards normalization (日本加快国家正常化步伐), India’s rapid economic growth and the increasing wariness towards a stronger China amongst China’s neighboring countries.” In this formulation, the OBOR concept stands at the core of an effort by China to move away from

viewing itself as simply an East Asian country to an identity as part of Central Asia and a main power on the Eurasian continent. This means that China is clearly returning to a traditional regional focus (回归传统地缘认知), paying attention to all of China’s neighbors rather than some of them (四面均衡). (Xue and Xu 2015)

This emphasis on China’s neighborly relations via OBOR is hardly surprising, given the larger effort by Xi’s government to strengthen Beijing’s “peripheral diplomacy” (周边外交) and augment a “cooperative and win-win ethos in international politics” (合作共赢为核心的新型国际关系; Xi 2013c; see also Zhang 2015; W. H. Zhao 2015). Although there might sometimes be reticence in elucidating how such peripheral diplomatic dealings can actually be conducted, a study done in collaboration with China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs identifies a systematic roadmap for the progressive initiation of the OBOR program:

The aim for China is to speed up the development of the western region. The one belt and one road will turn the western interior into the frontier in opening up to the world, development opportunities in the

central and western regions will increase and new growth points will emerge . . . this will be beneficial for enduring energy sources and resources, and also for transferring strongpoint industries from the eastern to the central and western regions and to countries on our periphery. (Z. G. Li 2015)

The preceding quote corresponds with Summers’s (2016, 1632) observation that western China is geographically imperative to OBOR, serving as a “bridgehead” (桥头堡) to link China with the rest of Asia as well as take forward the country’s “Develop the West” (西部大开发) policy that was conceived at the turn of the century. In Summers’s view, the new Silk Roads metaphor has been emerging for over a decade, in the actions of provincial and municipal governments (particularly Yunnan and Xinjiang provinces and Chengdu and Chongqing cities) seeking to forge connections both with neighboring provinces and beyond China’s borders, a “double opening.” For Summers (2016), therefore:

rather than being seen as a substantially new policy idea put forward by the current Chinese leadership, the belt and road initiative should be viewed as an extension, consolidation and political elevation of pre-existing policy ideas and practice at the sub-national level in China. (1634)

Chinese sources have illuminated these multiscale implications of OBOR by documenting how provincial actors are active players in the wider OBOR schema. This reinforces W. D. Liu’s (2014) earlier cited claim that the geographical limits and boundaries of OBOR are not cast in stone. For instance, L. X. Liu (2015), a professor at the Xinjiang University of Finance and Economics, elucidates the Xinjiang local government’s couching of its province’s strategic location as a “gateway” (关道) for China’s national economy and enterprises to “expand out” (走出去) into the global arena through the OBOR project. In southern China, Shenzhen officials have produced maps (e.g., Figure 3) to spell out the ways in which the city “aims to take advantage of the economic and geopolitical restructuring opportunities” afforded by the OBOR plan. Figure 3 exemplifies how the Shenzhen authorities have mapped their place on routes and roads to firmly establish the city’s role as a “strategic highland and bridgehead” of the OBOR initiative. On a larger scale, H. C. Gao (2014), the Chinese Minister of Commerce, noted in an opinion piece that China’s Central Asian neighbors (including Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan) are gearing themselves up for the “economic corridor” (经济廊道) of OBOR—pipeline, bridges, roads, and more—that is set to link China to the region for the purpose of enhancing energy cooperation and security. Similar plans have been proposed to connect Pakistan with China, to fulfill Beijing’s desire to build additional channels for its energy imports from the Middle East. In particular, commentaries have signaled how OBOR can potentially reduce China’s reliance on maritime routes in Southeast Asia or the northern sea

抓住国家“一带一路”战略带来的巨大增量经济和地缘政治格局重建的机遇，建设南中国的海洋经济中心城市，成为国家“一带一路”的战略高地和桥头堡。

Shenzhen aims to take advantage of the economic and geopolitical restructuring opportunities afforded by the national "one band, one road" strategy in order to establish itself as the urban epicenter of South China's marine economy and to position itself within the strategic highland and bridgehead of the "one band, one road" strategy.



Figure 3 Map showing Shenzhen's role in One Belt, One Road on display in Shenzhen Industrial Museum. Source: Photograph taken by Alexander Murphy, August 2016. Reproduced with permission. (Color figure available online.)

route (which falls mainly under Russia's jurisdiction and is becoming viable with increased seasonal melting of the Arctic ice caps) for its shipping needs (H. R. Liu 2016). It is also worth pointing out that official and academic discourses often employ a host of spatial metaphors (e.g., corridors, bridgeheads and gateways) to characterize the constituents of OBOR. According to W. D. Liu (2014), these metaphors help to conjure up imageries of flows, connectivity, linkages, and mobilities, arguing that these differ from classical geopolitical theories that emphasize more static notions of

pivot areas and territories.⁵ This goes in tandem with zooming in on OBOR's international appeal and the cooperative spirit it engenders (W. D. Liu 2014; see also W. D. Liu and Dunford 2016).

It is notable, however, that military writers in China have argued that the maritime portion of the OBOR initiative also constitutes the crucial strategic direction of China's rise. This, in turn, culminates in a firm belief that the development of sea routes will be critical to the country's entire development program (see Z. G. Li 2015). For C. G. Liu (2015), this

necessitates an enhanced level of the People's Liberation Army's access to important military support facilities along the maritime route. Alternatively, Liang (2015), a National Defense University professor and strategist, cast attention to "significant capabilities" (e.g., carrier battle groups) that will help to ensure the security of sea lanes. In other words, the OBOR idea is linked, in the minds of some Chinese analysts, with "a robust blue water naval capability dedicated to sea lines of communication defense" (Liang 2015) and related notions of China's anti-encirclement struggle (Garver and Wang 2010) and maritime power (Erickson and Wuthnow 2016).

Equally, however, the inclusive nature of the project is being routinely emphasized. At the governmental level, key figures such as Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi have declared that OBOR will be "sensitive to the comfort level of other parties, ensure transparency and openness, align with the development strategies of other participants and create synergies with existing regional cooperation mechanisms" (Y. Wang 2015). The metaphor of a "symphony" (交响乐) has been used to characterize OBOR as a multilateral and multistate participatory initiative (Huangfu and Wang 2015; Y. Ren 2015). In so doing, opportunities are created for the rebuttal of external criticisms directed at the OBOR project. One common criticism that these Chinese perspectives take issue with pertains to Washington's opposition to the AIIB, a key mechanism for funding the "infrastructure connectivity" (基础设施互联互通) plans envisaged in OBOR. Lu (2015) a professor of economics at Peking University, asserted that Washington's suspicions and questions regarding the AIIB are "just pretexts to oppose the AIIB and attempts to persuade other developed economies from joining it." He highlighted that "the US is the only major Western power to question the establishment of the AIIB" and that the fact that many Western countries have now joined is a "prelude to the restructuring of the global system." Crucially, there is the simultaneous contention that this supposed restructuring under the influence of the OBOR initiative involves moving away from the "harsh requirements" and interference with the "internal affairs and sovereignty of applicant countries" that allegedly characterize the Asian Development Bank, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund (K. J. Zhao 2015; see also Yan 2015). As such, OBOR is purported to set the groundwork for a more egalitarian and inclusive financial structure that is oriented toward "a community of shared interests" (利益共同体; K. J. Zhao 2015).

The similarities that foreign commentators have drawn between the OBOR project and the U.S.-led and -funded Marshall Plan of the late 1940s and 1950s have also not been well received within China. Chinese officials have dismissed such comparison, citing the workings of a persistent and "outdated Cold War mentality" (过时的冷战思维; Y. Wang 2015). Others have been more blunt and at times polemical in pointing out the fundamental

differences between the two programs (Jin 2015; Shen 2015). An article from the official press agency Xinhua emphasizes the differences, arguing that although "the Marshall Plan was, in a sense, a contingency plan which lasted about four years, China's 'One Belt, One Road' initiative consists of long-term projects aimed at promoting a more integrated and better communicated international community prospering together economically and culturally" (S. Wang 2015). The exclusionary aspects of the Marshall Plan take center stage in C. Gao's (2015) work. He proclaimed that "the Marshall Plan excluded communist countries and escalated confrontations between the Soviet Union and the West." This is in direct opposition to the premises and goals of OBOR, which is "open to all countries that want peace and development, with no conditions attached." C. Gao (2015) went on to conclude that the Marshall Plan was ultimately an "ideological plan" that helped to establish the "absolute dominance of the US currency through the Bretton Woods system," while seemingly attempting to revive the economies of Western Europe via "an unequal arrangement that was established at a time when the recipients had no alternative."

Imperial Origins

Although such Cold War disavowals are frequent in Chinese writings, what is notably absent from them is a genealogy of the term Silk Road. Attention to this, however, illuminates some of the underpinnings of the divergent readings of OBOR today. The terms *Seidenstraße* and *Seidenstraßen* (referring to both the singular Silk Road and the plural Silk Roads) were first coined in 1877 by von Richthofen (1833–1905) in the first book of his five-volume work on China—and an article that appeared in *Erkunde* (Berlin) the same year. English translations of the article appeared a year later in the London-based *Geographical Magazine* and New York-based *Popular Science* (for bibliographic details, see Chin 2013). In the first volume (itself 758 pages) of his books on China, von Richthofen (1877) staged a dialogue between his geographical predecessors' (notably Humboldt) sources from classical antiquity, Chinese texts, and his own travels in China. Ptolemy looms large (the original from the second century CE), along with those he drew on, notably Marinus of Tyre (circa CE 70–130), but von Richthofen made more precise identification of the lands known in the Greco-Roman world as *Serica* (the source of Silk) and named and mapped Silk Roads extending westward. In a fold-out map, the Silk Roads appear as lines stretching from China and into Central Asia and then across Eurasia—red lines for those he based on a reading of the Greco-Roman sources and blue for ones he constructed from Chinese sources (Figure 4). This was an imaginative leap, and although he footnoted an earlier French map, dating from the start of the nineteenth century (see Chin 2013) depicting ancient caravan routes between Greece and China, the bold colors in von Richthofen's map render the Silk Roads seemingly

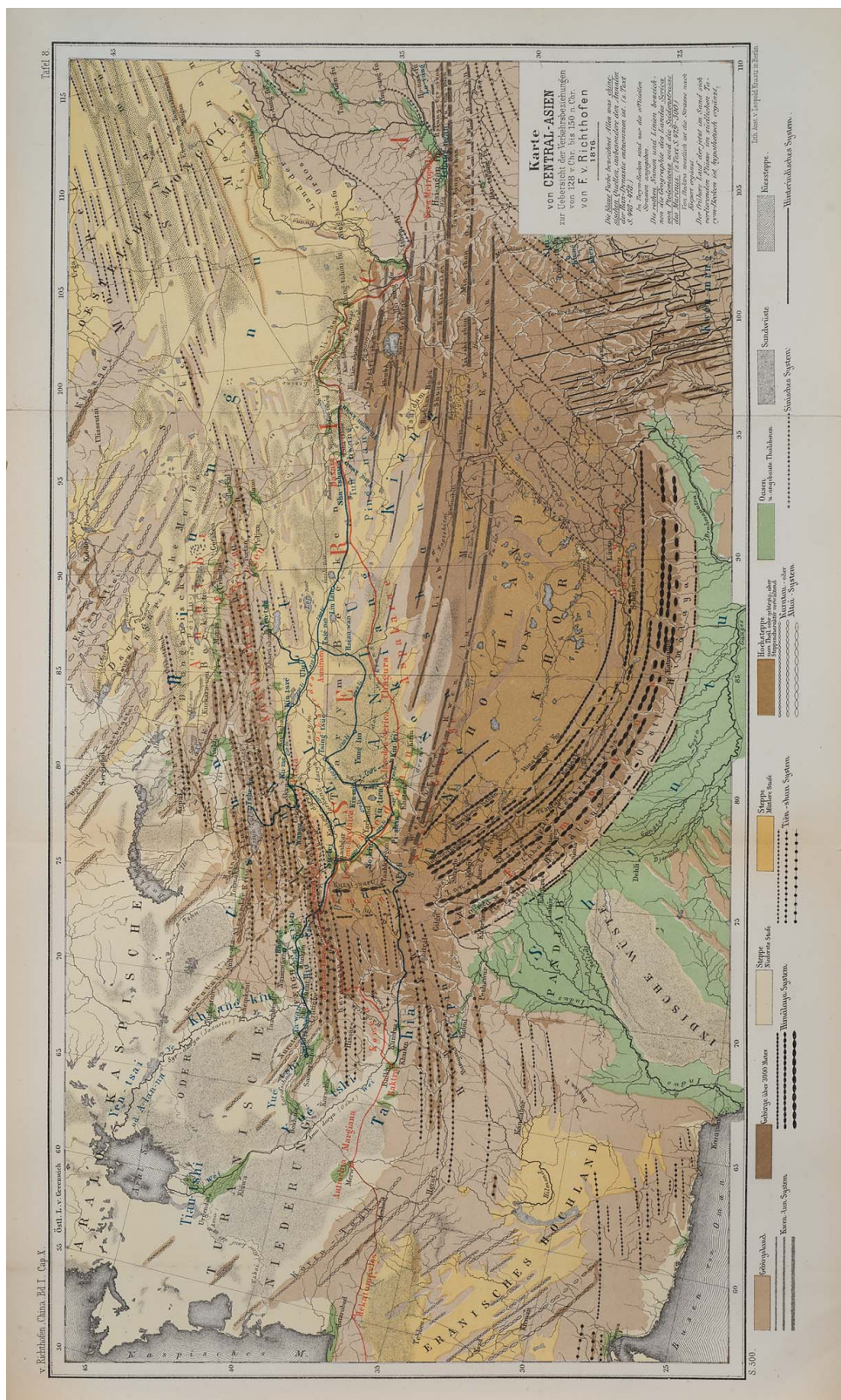


Figure 4 Map of Central Asia for overview of trade routes and movements. Source: Fold-out map facing page 500 of Richtshofen (1877). (Color figure available online.)

tangible. They start to look like modern rail or highway maps. Such a similarity is not coincidental.

Although he had been taught by Carl Ritter, von Richthofen was influenced by mid-nineteenth-century British commercial geography, which was also being written in imperial frames. Moreover, from 1868 to 1872, he worked on geological surveys of China, producing reports on opportunities for mineral exploitation for the European–American Chamber of Commerce in Shanghai. Although he then returned to Europe and became professor of geography at Leipzig in 1883 and moved to Berlin in 1886 (Vaugh 2007), von Richthofen’s prior surveys were reanimated in 1897 when he published a booklet on the port of Jiaozhou in eastern China, following its 1897 seizure by Germany (and the granting of a ninety-nine-year lease by China, in the manner of other imperial treaty ports). In it, von Richthofen advocated railroad construction that would link Jiaozhou with Xi’an (which his prior maps identified as the eastern end of the Silk Roads) and then going further west, extending to Europe.

Hence, the imperial backdrop to von Richthofen’s work is notable, part of what Zimmerer (2016, 68) referred to as the late nineteenth-century “codependency” of German colonialism and the establishment of academic geography. This imperial moment also described in Marchand’s (2009) encyclopedic account of *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire*, in which von Richthofen:

not only became an influential professor of geography, reaching the University of Berlin in 1886, but also became highly active in the precolonial lobby. . . . His *China* volumes [three volumes, 1877–1912] were published, haltingly, but in lavish editions, heavily subsidized by the Kaiser and Prussian Academy of Sciences. They were used not only for scholarly purposes, but also, it seems, were instrumental in identifying the geographical advantages of the port city to which the Germans would later lay claim (Qingdao) and heavily used by planners laying out China’s railroads. (156)

Within twenty years, the idea of the Silk Road found expression in what Marchand (2009) termed “the great Central Asian antiquities rush” as

both emerging eastern powers (Russia and Japan) and western powers (England, France, and Germany) moved aggressively to claim new legal, economic, political, and archeological privileges from the failing Qing Empire. (418)

This chaotic and competitive process was “wholly embedded in colonial cultural politics” in Marchand’s (2009, 422) words. Through it, though, an enhanced sense of the tangible historical connections between the classical worlds of ancient Greece and Rome, Persia, China, and Japan emerged, albeit at the same time

that notions of difference (and putative superiority) of the West and Europe found heightened expression in reworked discourses of race, civilization, and empire. Archeological excavations became entangled with plans for geopolitical spheres of influence as what would soon be called the Great Game (of interimperial competition) in inner Asia⁶ accelerated and was joined by Germany, with aspirations to displace the British and to connect Berlin to Baghdad and places further east (McMeekin 2010). In the long lead-up to World War II, the term Silk Road, or sometimes in its plural form (an ambiguity that was present in von Richthofen’s original work, as we noted), proliferated. Materials appeared in Japanese by the 1940s but according to Whitfield (2007):

wide usage in print only became apparent in the west in the 1960s when the “Silk Road” started to be used in popular works. In 1963, Luis Boulnois wrote *The Silk Road*, the first of an expanding genre of historical guides. Thereafter the use of this term grows steadily, and seeps out further into the non-scholarly arena. (202)

Whitfield noted that the first Chinese-language reference to Silk Road (rendered as 丝绸之路) that she could trace is in the 1972 catalog of Urumchi’s Xinjiang Museum, but “by the 1980s it was commonplace” (202) in China. In fact, von Richthofen’s Swedish student Sven Hedin, later more infamous for his relationship with Nazi geographers (Danielsson 2016), continued to survey Central Asia between the 1920s and 1940s, liaising with Chiang Kai-shek’s Nanjing-based Kuomintang government, who appointed him “advisor to the Railroad Ministry and outfitted him for an expedition to investigate the potential for cultivating and colonizing the Xinjiang region” (Johansson 2012, 82). As Chin (2013, 217) noted, not only did Hedin write an “international best seller *The Silk Road* (1936),” but he plotted Berlin–Shanghai airline routes for Lufthansa in the 1920s and Europe–China motor-road routes for the Kuomintang in the 1930s. She detailed how the late 1930s and early 1940s saw references to the Silk Road enter Chinese publications but not on anything like the scale and scope into which decades later they would be reworked into OBOR.

Discussion and Conclusion

After the People’s Republic of China was established in 1949, the plans hatched by Hedin and the Kuomintang were largely put aside; yet references to the Silk Road boomed elsewhere, long before OBOR’s reworking of the Silk Road idea. Thorsten (2005) charted the multiple popular circuits in which references to the Silk Road have been invoked in the West over the last few decades, which included “documentaries, websites, feature films, tabletop books, and discourses of diplomacy and tourism” (301) and involved UNESCO, the Smithsonian, and

a Harvard-affiliated musical ensemble. Through the last decade, too, Silk Road became the title for a domain on the dark web bringing together vendors and consumers of narcotics (much of which happens to originate in Asia). After shutdowns by U.S. and European law enforcement agencies, reloaded variants are still using the “brand.” In the mid-2000s, around a decade prior to President Xi’s reanimation of the Silk Roads, the term started to crop up in U.S. strategies for integrating post-Taliban Afghanistan into networks of trade and diplomacy that would include the rest of post-Soviet Central Asia under U.S. guidance (Laruelle 2015b), culminating in Hillary Clinton’s 2011 announcement of the New Silk Road Initiative to bring trade and stability to Afghanistan that was mentioned in the opening to this article.

That that the idea of a Silk Road(s) contains a history closely entangled with European imperialism is skirted around in the contemporary reworking of the concept into OBOR narratives. As we have seen, those narratives are themselves caught up with contemporary geopolitics. Whether their relative silence on the longer history of the term Silk Road constitutes disavowal, dissimulation, or disregard is an open question. Yet the ways in which Chinese discussions of OBOR creatively appropriate what originally emerged within European narratives in the age of empire could usefully be interpreted as an example of what Doyle (2010, 2014) called *interimperiality*. She used this term to refer to how empires rework networks, ideas, sites, and spaces, which she termed “sedimented infrastructures,” that were, in turn, central to other prior imperial systems. Hence, she also challenged the “Eurocentric assumption that western European imperialism accounts for all recent imperialism, with the concomitant misperception that all territory is either a European (post)colony or uncolonized.” That classical civilization provided an imperial repertoire appropriated by European and Romanov successors in the nineteenth century is a well-established historiographical theme, but for Doyle such ideological and practical reworking is the stuff of all imperial systems. She discerned “the phenomena of inter-imperial loops, or dialectical formations, at every level from the basic necessities to aesthetic and scientific transformations” (Doyle 2014), citing the ways in which, for example, the Abbasids appropriated technologies from the Tang:

Thus the tools that had served to consolidate Chinese empire enabled Islam, in turn, to become a world-class imperial competitor, posing a threat to Chinese borders. In the long run . . . this distribution of innovative material forms drew Europe’s interest and motivated its entry into the world-system, eventually allowing it to compete with both Islamic and Chinese empires. In this sense, Europe benefited from its late entry into the system. (Doyle 2014, 175)

In similar terms, the reworking of von Richthofen and Hedin’s maps helps to make sense of the ways that OBOR has (for all the references to other meanings OBOR signals) drawn lines across Eurasia and the seas to the south. It seems that once von Richthofen had named and drawn Silk Roads in 1877, their hold on the cartographic imagination could not be easily erased. The preface to his 1877 volume is dated December 1876. As von Richthofen was compiling the maps, the United States turned 100 and the Transcontinental Express reached San Francisco from New York in a record eighty-three hours, a journey that had taken months prior to the completion of the railroad across the United States just seven years earlier. Out of this late nineteenth-century mix of imperialism, infrastructure, and state construction, a geometry of lines and topology of sovereign spaces emerged. Ingold (2007) noted how modern cartographic maps “always have borders separating the space inside, which is part of the map, from the space outside, which is not” (85). Together with such frames, they frequently include “point-to-point connections” that “enable the prospective traveler to assemble a route-plan, in the form of a chain of connections, and thereby *virtually* to reach his destination even before setting out. As a cognitive artefact or assembly, the plan pre-exists its enactment ‘on the ground’” (85).

Von Richthofen drew lines connecting the civilizations that he valorized as worthy predecessors of the nineteenth-century European empires, ancient China and Rome, “while what lies in between—Central Asia, Iran, and Mesopotamia/Syria—is ignored” (Rezakhani 2010, 421) or rendered as “mere transit stations for connecting the two ‘greatest empires of the ancient world’” (Rezakhani 2010, 433). For all of the shifts in the intervening 140 years and historians’ arguments that Silk Road(s) were “not like Route 66—a ribbon of highway spanning a continent” (Milward 2013, 3) and ethnographic accounts of *diverse* trade networks overlaying Eurasia (Marsden 2016, 2017), well-defined lines resurface in today’s references to belts and roads—which similarly seem unable to resist an urge to draw lines that connect with or articulate geopolitical visions.

Although standoffs in the South China Sea have become a frequent focus for discussion of U.S.–China dynamics in the last few years, in the longer term, arguably the representation of China, or what Tang (2015, 3) called “the idea of China,” has long been significant as “an ingredient within the developing identity of America itself.” In combination with and to the extent that OBOR also signals new modalities and geographies of interimperial reworking and comparison, we are faced with interesting and expansive questions. What collisions and recombinations might lie ahead? To what extent will OBOR disarm opponents and win friends?⁷ Fathoming them means asking how OBOR relates to China’s geopolitical positioning and its so-called rise. It also entails attention to “novel

variants of imperialism, colonialism and postcolonialism” (Sidaway, Woon, and Jacobs 2014, 13) and the responses they might evoke on the international stage. In other words, these are important geopolitical questions that pose thorny analytical challenges.

Meanwhile, the idea of OBOR has itself spun off into different popular renditions in a variety of contexts. Within Mainland China, a statue officially translated into English as “Song of Belt and Road” (一带一路之歌) was unveiled at the Boao Forum for Asia held in Hainan Province in 2015 to mark the OBOR initiative’s contributions to that island’s future. Donated by a corporation based in Chongqing (Sichuan Province), the statue, which is made up of a golden arc encircled by a wavy line (denoting respectively the road and belt components in the OBOR project), likens OBOR to a harmonious melody that will unite the world and bring win-win benefits for the global community. The municipality of Chongqing has also taken the opportunity to raise its profile, presenting the artefact as a symbol of the Chongqing’s ability to serve as the “golden key” to unlock OBOR’s enormous potential. Alternatively, however, netizens in Hong Kong have hinged on a local journalist’s satirical conversion of the term “一带一路” (One Belt, One Road) to the phonetically similar expression “一戴一露” (to wear and to reveal), mocking the overt “wearing” of the OBOR

placard by Hong Kong’s Beijing-appointed Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying, who has made frequent references to OBOR (see Figure 5). Such critique is perhaps unsurprising, given the backdrop of the 2014 “Umbrella Revolution” (雨伞革命) in Hong Kong, whereby large-scale protests coming in the form of the “Occupy Central Movement” (占领中环) sought to maintain Hong Kong’s judicial autonomy, free from interference from Mainland China (Lee 2016). That these popular gestures have circulated widely in the last few years suggests not only the dissemination of the idea of OBOR but also the ongoing capacity for creative reappropriations of the Silk Road that transcend the parameters set by official narratives. ■

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Notes

¹ Around eighteen months on from President Xi’s speeches in Astana and Jakarta, more detailed reference to “One Belt, One Road” and the policies that it refers to were released on 28 March 2015 in the official document entitled, “The Visions and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and Twenty-First Century Maritime Silk Road.” This publication was jointly issued by the three Chinese state organizations: the National Development and Reform Commission, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Ministry of Commerce. Today a search on Google for One Belt, One Road or for 一带一路 on the Chinese search engine Baidu yields a vast quantity of statements and commentary.

² Liu Weidong is a Professor of Geography at the Chinese Academy of Sciences, where he holds a concurrent appointment as Director of the One Belt One Road Strategic Research Center. In an informal conversation with one of the authors of this article (in Beijing, September 2016), Professor Liu explained that he was asked by the National Development and Reform Commission of China to engage in detailed research on OBOR. This corresponds to his argument that OBOR should be seen as an ongoing creative and open project (W. D. Liu 2014).

³ Although the “road” here is arguably a reference to the historical Silk Road, “belt” in the Chinese language (i.e., 带) can similarly refer to zones that articulate Beijing’s emphasis



Figure 5 Image circulated by a Hong Kong journalist that takes a satirical view of One Belt, One Road. The words accompanying the image translate to: “2016 [China’s] governance report: To wear and to reveal.” Source: Dong Fang Sheng. Reproduced with permission. (Color figure available online.)

on identifying key economic zones and corridors for the initiation of OBOR. In popular discourse, “带” (belt) has also been interpreted as “bringing someone/something along.” When combined with “一路” (one road), which has the alternative meaning of “an entire journey,” it signals OBOR as a Chinese initiative that brings the world together on a journey toward harmonious development.

⁴ Although there is a rich account of how Mackinder has been read in Central Asia (Megoran and Sharapova 2013), the reception of Mackinder’s work and subsequent Western and Russian geopolitics in China is understudied. The selection of Astana as the location for President Xi’s first speech on a Silk Road economic belt, however, needs also to take account of the fertile ground it found there, in which revitalized “Eurasianist” ideas first developed (in Sofia) during the 1920s by Russian emigres following the Bolshevik revolution and ensuing civil war now “functions as an official doctrine for a state that presents itself as an encounter between East and West, Europe and Asia, Russia and the East, which places Kazakhs on a pedestal as the brilliant legacy of its location at the crossroads of worlds” (Laruelle 2015a, 188).

⁵ Arguably, however, the dialectic between movement and stasis has long been a point of departure for geopolitics, a point richly illustrated in Barney (2015).

⁶ The naming of Central Asia/Inner Asia or, as the historian Perdue (2005) preferred to term the region (along with the U.S. State Department), “Central Eurasia,” remains contested. Sometimes scripted as marginal or remote, a variety of commentators have conversely seen it as pivotal. Perdue (2005) remarked, “A current of historical interpretation from the Russian Eurasian school, to the geopolitics of Halford Mackinder and Owen Lattimore, to the contemporary world historians and theorists of world systems has viewed Central Eurasia as a key region of the Eurasian world system” (9).

⁷ We thank an anonymous referee for this formulation.

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